

THE CLASS OF 1964 POLICY RESEARCH SHOP

NEW HAMPSHIRE RAIL TRAIL FUNDING

PRESENTED TO NH RAIL TRAIL ADVISORY STAKEHOLDER COMMITTEE Commissioner Victoria Sheehan, NH Department of Transportation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the country, rail trails are an environmentally-friendly alternative to automobiles and other fossil fuel-burning forms of commuting. They also provide safe locations for a wide range of recreational activities, including mountain biking, horseback riding, and running, as well as winter pedestrian activities such as Nordic Skiing and snowshoeing. In addition, rail trails also serve as corridors for the usage of snowmobiles and off-highway recreational vehicles (OHRVs), which includes all-terrain vehicles, dirt or motorized trail bikes, and ultra-terrain vehicles. The New Hampshire General Court recently passed legislation to update its rail trail management practices.¹ The state intends to undertake an economic analysis of this system to improve its funding mechanisms for publicly owned rail trails. This report examines the current practices for rail trail funding in New Hampshire at both the federal and state levels, as well as at the local level (including funding from private and non-profit organizations). Next, this report details rail trail funding practices in three key Northeastern states: Vermont, Maine, and New York. Finally, this report overviews the funding structure utilized by the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department. The goal of analyzing this array of funding practices is to compare funding for rail trails across states and in other recreational areas to highlight best practices that can be adopted by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation to fund the development and maintenance of rail trails.

1 INTRODUCTION

New Hampshire has a vast network of outdoor trails, which are enjoyed in a variety of ways. Hiking, biking, snowmobiling, and horseback riding are all popular activities. To reduce the environmental impact of constructing new trails, rail trails are constructed in abandoned rail corridors.² These trails are created by removing the railroad tracks and ties, in addition to clearing any path obstructions. Currently, there are 562 miles of rail trails and 280 miles of railbed designated as potential rail trails in New Hampshire.³ A 2019 New Hampshire State Senate bill, SB 185-FN-A, established a state Rail Trail Plan Advisory Committee.⁴ The Committee is tasked with supporting the maintenance and development of New Hampshire's existing and potential rail trails, since the state legislature believes that rail trails are a resource that can improve the standard of living and generate revenue for adjacent businesses throughout the state. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine the exact cost of creating or maintaining a mile of rail trail because of variations in surface material, width, signs, amenities, drainage mechanisms, and structures such as steps or bridges. The Rails to Trails Conservancy approximates that rail trail construction costs between \$150,000 and \$350,000 per mile depending on the width of the trail and the surface, which can include, from cheapest to most expensive, packed dirt, crushed stone, asphalt, and concrete.⁵

2 PURPOSE STATEMENT

The Rail Trail Advisory Stakeholder Committee (RTASC) of the New Hampshire Department of Transportation tasked the Class of 1964 Policy Research Shop with this research, which is composed of three parts. First, we examine the existing methods by which rail trails are funded in the state to offer a comprehensive picture of the current situation. Then, we contrast funding mechanisms adopted by three other states: Vermont, Maine, and New York. These comparisons reveal what ideas have already been implemented and what the best practices proved to be. In the final section of the report, we compare rail trail funding in New Hampshire to the funding of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department to develop a better understanding of how similar recreational initiatives are funded within the state. Through this analysis, we can shed light on the best practices that can be employed to improve the current funding system in New Hampshire.

3 METHODOLOGY

The first part of this research examines the current funding mechanisms that New Hampshire uses to fund its rail trails. The next part examines the practices of comparable states to observe best practices for rail trails as New Hampshire seeks to potentially expand the funding of rail trails in the Granite State. Finally, the research will compare current rail trail funding practices in New Hampshire to funding for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

3.1 EXAMINATION OF CURRENT FUNDING PRACTICES IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

We examine current funding for rail trails in New Hampshire by looking at funding that comes from federal, state, and local, private, and non-profit sources. For this section of our research, we utilize publicly available government data, contacting knowledgeable individuals as needed for clarification, and examining tax documents from non-profit organizations in the state.

3.2 IDENTIFYING IMPORTANT VARIABLES FROM OTHER STATES

After analyzing the current funding streams that New Hampshire uses to develop and maintain its rail trail system, this report will investigate rail trail funding practices in Vermont, Maine, and New York to discover areas for improvement. Vermont trails are highlighted due to their similarities in physical and usage as well as their sizable projected growth in coming years. Maine was selected for its developed rail trail system and its comparable population size to New Hampshire, enabling direct comparisons between the two states, both of which are also connected to a major multi-use path that includes rail trails. As with the analysis of New Hampshire funding practices, this research will entail looking at funding that comes from federal, state, and local, private, and non-profit sources. We utilize publicly available government data, contact knowledgeable individuals as needed for clarification, and examine tax documents from non-profit organizations in the state to provide an overview of funding mechanisms in each state.

3.2.1 VERMONT

New Hampshire and Vermont are similar in a plethora of ways. The area and geography of the states are similar, and both states see similar types of recreational activities on their trails. However, there are distinct political and economic differences between Vermont and New Hampshire. Generally, Vermont has seen strong support for rail trails from statewide political leadership and includes a set amount of funding for recreational trails in its annual transportation budget. Vermont receives notable federal funding for trails as well and has a well-resourced trail system. Finally, Vermont rail trails are projected to see significant growth as construction on the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail ramps up, showcasing Vermont's willingness to invest in rail trails. These similarities and differences make Vermont an opportune comparison with New Hampshire, as the state will face similar physical challenges while developing rail trails but due to its different political and economic environment may not encounter the same budgetary or political obstacles.

3.2.2 MAINE

Although New Hampshire and Maine have distinct political, economic, and geographic environments, they are both rural states with comparable population sizes and demographics. Notably, Maine and New Hampshire have similar rail trail mileage. Additionally, the East Coast Greenway, an important multi-use path that connects numerous rail trails, traverses both states. For these reasons, we selected Maine to compare and analyze its rail trail funding practices with those of New Hampshire. It is important to examine if Maine utilizes different and more effective approaches to securing funding for rail trails.

3.2.3 NEW YORK

New York was chosen because it takes a centralized approach to rail trail management and serves as a contrasting example to New Hampshire's decentralized rail trail network. New York is part of the New England Spine Network, with rail trails connecting into Vermont and Connecticut.⁶ While it is unrealistic to assume that New Hampshire will ever spend as much money on rail trails as New York given the differences in the two states' populations and tax structures, there are still innovative practices that can be replicated from New York.

Table 1: Key Facts at a Glance

State	Population	FY 2020-2021 State Budget	Land Area (square miles)	Existing Rail Trail Mileage
New Hampshire	1,377,529	\$13,000,000,000	9,349	562
Vermont	646,503	\$6,300,000,000	9,616	130
Maine	1,344,212	\$10,500,000,000	35,385	399
New York	20,215,751	\$173,000,000,000	54,556	1,253

3.3 INTRASTATE FUNDING

One additional source of inspiration for rail trail funding solutions are other departments in the state of New Hampshire, such as the New Hampshire Fish and Game department. The department is primarily dependent on federal funding and user-funding generated from hunting and fishing licenses. Understanding how Fish and Game executes its mission with limited state funding can provide innovative solutions to raising funds for rail trails from trail users.

3.3.1 FISH AND GAME DEPARTMENT FUNDING

By examining the Fish and Game department, we can better understand how funding for similar organizations is allocated in New Hampshire. Founded in 1935, the Fish and Game department transitioned from being primarily concerned with restocking the Merrimack and Connecticut Rivers with seabound fish to managing and protecting fish, wildlife, and marine resources across the state.²² Conducting a detailed breakdown of the department's revenue streams will be critical to determining which funding strategies may be applicable to rail trail funding.

4 CURRENT FUNDING MECHANISMS FOR NH RAIL TRAILS

Rail trails, like other recreational trails, are eligible to receive funding through various federal, state-wide, and private programs. The majority of appropriations for rail trails stem from the federal government, although state governments retain authority over fund distribution in adherence to federal guidelines. In turn, states make the funds available to municipalities and local organizations, since these institutions are more in tune with the needs of their constituents. New Hampshire has limited state revenue sources without an income or sales tax, resulting in an increased reliance on federal funding. Finally, private interest groups and non-profit organizations make independent financial contributions towards rail trails.

4.1 FEDERAL FUNDING

The federal government provides the majority of funding for trails in New Hampshire. From 2016 through 2020, rail trails in New Hampshire have received \$9,365,707.00 in funding from the federal government.⁷ New Hampshire receives all of these funds through The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, or FAST Act. The FAST Act was originally authorized for five years beginning in 2015 and set to expire in 2020 without reauthorization. In October 2020, Congress reauthorized funding for the FAST Act through fiscal year 2021. The reauthorization bill provides for continued funding of all programs administered under the FAST Act at or below fiscal year 2020 levels.⁸ On average, New Hampshire receives \$63 million each year from the federal government under the FAST Act, a minor portion of which can be directed toward rail trail development.⁹ Funding from the federal government has remained stable through the past five years, with the minimal changes in funding typically accounted for by inflation. Local governments as well as non-profit and private organizations can apply for these funds and are responsible for project development and implementation.

One of the most consistent sources of federal funding is the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP), a set-aside under the FAST Act.¹⁰ From 2015 through 2020, TAP has awarded an average of \$850,000 each year to rail trail projects within New Hampshire, approximately a quarter of the average amount of total TAP funding awarded in New Hampshire annually.¹¹ Table 2 below provides a comprehensive view of the history of rail trail projects receiving TAP funds between 2015 and 2019. The data in the table was sourced from a project database maintained by the Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and NHDOT's online records and figures have been adjusted for inflation.¹² Note that grants were awarded on a two-year cycle in 2017-2018 and 2019-2020.¹³

Table 2: TAP Funding Awarded to Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Federal TAP Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2015	\$534,474.26	\$133,618.84	\$668,093.10
2016	\$713,698.55	\$178,424.64	\$892,123.18
2017-2018	\$1,886,734.19	\$471,683.28	\$2,358,417.47
2019-2020	\$1,120,685.66	<i>Data unavailable at this time</i>	<i>Data unavailable at this time</i>

The New Hampshire Department of Transportation (NHDOT) manages these funds. Other projects are also eligible for TAP funding, including sidewalks and multi-use paths.¹⁴ TAP awards a minimum \$320,000 of federal funding per project, with a maximum award of \$1 million. As is true of all FAST Act programs, TAP projects require the grant recipient to match at least 20 percent of the awarded funds. In New Hampshire, the recipient's share of the project expenses does not need to be secured prior to applying for the TAP grant. An additional requirement unique to New Hampshire is that the selected projects must also receive approval from the governor and the Executive Council before funds are distributed.¹⁵

The Recreational Trails Program (RTP), another set-aside from the FAST Act, is an additional funding source available to states for the development and maintenance of rail trails.¹⁶ New Hampshire has awarded an average of \$139,390 of RTP funds each year to rail trail projects within the state, which is around 21 percent of the average amount of total RTP funding awarded in New Hampshire annually.¹⁷

State-administered RTP funding provides grants for all recreational trail types. Examples of eligible projects include maintaining existing trails and their associated facilities, acquiring equipment and hiring personnel, construction costs, and trail-related educational services.¹⁸ The grant program is administered by the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails, which is housed within the New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation. Although the Governor is permitted to opt-out of the set-aside requirement, the New Hampshire governor has not chosen to do so since the inclusion of this provision. Over the last five years, New Hampshire's RTP set-aside has averaged around \$1.3 million.¹⁹ A history of RTP funding awarded to rail trail projects between 2016 and 2020 can be found in Table 3 below. The data in the table was sourced from the public RTP Project database maintained by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and has been adjusted for inflation.²⁰

Table 3: RTP Funding Awarded to Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Federal RTP Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2016	\$0	\$0	\$0
2017	\$117,963.15	\$26,950.51	\$144,913.66
2018	\$203,126.68	\$154,801.51	\$357,928.19
2019	\$191,861.26	\$27,432.84	\$219,294.10
2020	\$183,995.08	\$20,157.04	\$204,152.12

A final federal grant program that can fund rail trail projects is the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ), also administered under the FAST Act.²¹ CMAQ has awarded an average of \$1,703,625 each year to rail trail projects within New Hampshire, which is nearly 30 percent of the average amount of total CMAQ funding awarded in New Hampshire annually.²² A more comprehensive view of CMAQ funding awarded to rail trail projects for FY 2015-2019 can be found in Table 4 below. The data in the table was sourced from a project database maintained by the FHWA and adjusted for inflation.²³

Table 4: CMAQ Funding Awarded to Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Federal CMAQ Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2015	\$3,570,481.76	\$0	\$3,570,481.76
2016	\$0	\$0	\$0
2017	\$74,497.96	\$18,624.49	\$93,122.45
2018	\$109,121.70	\$27,280.42	\$136,402.12
2019	\$4,764,022.77	\$1,191,005.69	\$5,955,028.46

CMAQ funds transportation projects that improve air quality and reduce congestion. The primary goal of the program is to support the attainment and maintenance of National Ambient Air Quality Standards for ozone, carbon monoxide, or particulate matter.²⁴ Funding from this program is available to municipalities and organizations, is administered by NHDOT and again requires a 20 percent minimum match of funds by the grantee. There is a \$1.2 million federal funding maximum on projects, and New Hampshire typically receives approximately \$11 million each year for all CMAQ projects.²⁵

The last project application cycle held under the CMAQ program by NHDOT was in 2019; it is unclear when the next call for projects will be announced.

4.2 STATE FUNDING

Besides the \$200,000 investment that New Hampshire made to upgrade the rail trail network through the passage of SB185 in 2019, the state does not allocate any money in their state operating budget directly to rail trails. While the NHDOT is tasked with overseeing the rail trails update, they do not have a staff member currently assigned to the task as their primary function. The NHDOT is further divided into eight divisions, with the Division of Aeronautics, Rail, and Transit overseeing the rail trail updates. This division is broken into the Bureau of Aeronautics and the Bureau of Rail & Transit, the latter of which is responsible for the rail trail system upgrades. The Bureau of Rail & Transit Administrative Fund, which covers the salaries for the employees tasked with monitoring rail trail upgrades, has the following operating budgets. Data in Table 5 was sourced from public Bureau of Rail & Transit records and figures were adjusted for inflation.²⁶ A breakdown of rail trail-specific funding through the Bureau of Rail & Transit is currently unavailable.

Table 5: The Bureau of Rail & Transit Administrative Fund Budget

Fiscal Year	Operating Budget
2017	\$220,472
2018	\$212,972
2019	\$237,298
2020	\$240,583
2021	\$243,401*

**Projected figure*

Though not directly out of the state operating budget, state funding can also be obtained through the Trails Bureau's Grant-in-Aid (GIA) program. Through this program, the state government allocates specific funds to local governments and private organizations for trail projects.

The GIA program represents a crucial source of user-funding of rail trails. Snowmobiling and driving off highway recreational vehicles (OHRVs) on trails are popular rail trail uses in New Hampshire, and, by paying registration fees for their vehicles, these types of trail users help directly contribute to rail trail development and maintenance. The New Hampshire Trails bureau receives roughly 75 percent of revenue generated through snowmobile registration in New Hampshire and roughly 54 percent of revenue generated from wheeled OHRV registrations. These funding sources yielded a total of

\$250,000 in grant money for fiscal year 2020.²⁷ The remaining 25 percent and 45 percent of respective registrations revenue goes towards the Fish and Game Department and transactional fees. The GIA program also receives revenue from unrefunded gas taxes. GIA program funds cannot be outsourced into any other projects aside from the Grant-in-Aid program under the Administrative Rules, Res 8400 and Res 8500.²⁸

All types of trail projects are eligible for funding under GIA, and a significant portion of funding from GIA goes towards other types of trails or for general trail grooming projects throughout the state. However, several specific rail trail projects have been funded through OHRV GIA awards over the past five years. Records for the aggregate funding of rail trail-specific projects, adjusted for inflation, can be found in Table 6 below. Figures for New Hampshire GIA Awards are sourced through the New Hampshire Trail Bureau's online records.²⁹

Table 6: OHRV GIA Funding for Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Funding
2016	\$0
2017	\$0
2018	\$35,632.06
2019	\$35,632.06
2020	\$37,145.00

4.3 NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION

The New Hampshire Division of Parks and Recreation is responsible for overseeing and maintaining the state's 93 parks.³⁰ These parks include recreational sites, trail systems, historical sites, and the Cannon Mountain Ski Area. To cover this wide range of landholdings, the Division of Parks and Recreation is divided into three bureaus: The Bureau of Park Operations, The Bureau of Trails, and The Bureau of Historical Sites.³¹ The Bureau of Trails administers the RTP, which provides funding for public trail projects throughout the state of New Hampshire. As stated in Section 4.1, approximately 21 percent of RTP funding in New Hampshire goes to rail trail projects. The other 79 percent is used for other trail projects within New Hampshire. This section examines the application process that the Division of Parks and Recreation uses for administering RTP funding so that rail trail organizations can become familiar with this funding mechanism and increase the share of funding that goes to rail trails in the future.

4.3.1 RECREATIONAL TRAILS PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The RTP awards grant money on an annual basis to public trail projects. Funding can be used for the maintenance and restoration of existing trails, purchase and lease of trail construction and maintenance equipment, construction of new trails, development and rehabilitation of trailside and trailhead facilities, trail linkages, and acquisition of easements or property for trails.³² RTP funding is drawn from the federal gas tax revenue generated from fuel purchases for snowmobiles and other off-road vehicles.³³ Grant funding is broken down between motorized and non-motorized trail funding, with 30 percent of the overall funding awarded to trail projects that serve motorized vehicles. Another 30 percent is awarded to trail projects that serve non-motorized vehicles. The remaining 40 percent of funds are awarded to multi-use projects or trails that serve both motorized and non-motorized users.³⁴

4.3.2 RECREATIONAL TRAILS PROGRAM FUNDING PROCEDURES

The Division of Parks and Recreation typically holds three RTP workshops throughout the Spring. These workshops have been made virtual and for the 2021 grant application cycle due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the sign-up link on the New Hampshire Recreational Trail Program's website.³⁵ Both sessions are currently scheduled for May 5, 2021, with one being held during the daytime and the other being held in the evening. In other years, a member of the organization applying for grant money is required to attend one of those sessions, which are held in Concord and Manchester. Grant applications are due during the middle of June each year, with this year's deadline at 4:00 PM ET on June 18, 2021.³⁶ While Electronic copies are allowed, the original application must be submitted on paper.³⁷ All applications must be mailed *and* received by the Division of Parks and Recreation by the deadline, as opposed to being post-marked by that date. Any late applications will not be considered until the next year's grant cycle.³⁸

After applications are submitted, the Division of Parks and Recreation takes the summer to review each project. While the Division of Parks and Recreation does not publicly release the total number of applicants, they state the program is "highly competitive," and evaluations take place on a points system. Points are lost if the grant applications lack certain required information, or if any attachments are mislabeled or not labeled.³⁹ The major components required on all applications include the project proposal, project description, environmental and historical analysis, and the budget section.⁴⁰ Other important requirements include the Project Administrator Authorization form, the Landowner Permission form, and the topographical and trail system maps of the project area.⁴¹ Letters of support for the project are not a requirement but are strongly encouraged. While the Division of Parks and Recreation does not give specific metrics for which points are earned in evaluation, there appear to be two main areas that are examined, based on previous grant winners: feasibility and impact. Feasibility refers to the project's ability to be accomplished given the amount of funding requested, as well as the level of support for it. If a project's grant request is likely too little to accomplish what it aims to or is

asking for too much money for its scope, it is likely to be rejected. The project's feasibility is also measured by the level of monetary support it has in matching pledges. While there must be at least a 20 percent match to the RTP funds, some projects have a higher percentage of pledged matching funds.⁴² The impact of a project is a largely subjective measure, but broadly refers to a project's ability to transform an aspect of a trail that will maximize the public's benefit, which has to do with the number of people that the trail serves and the degree of change that will occur.

Given that trails in New Hampshire serve varying purposes, RTP grant applicants are only considered and evaluated against other applicants within their funding category: motorized, non-motorized, or multi-use.⁴³ Rail trails in New Hampshire primarily fall into the non-motorized category, however groups could potentially apply for funding from the multi-use section if they allow for snowmobile use during the winter, when non-motorized use is limited to snowshoeing and cross-country skiing. While rail trail groups may wish to keep these trails limited to just non-motorized use year-round, expanding to allow motorized use during the winter could allow for more RTP funding. Grant applications could be made in the multi-use category, which is allocated 40 percent of overall RTP funding, as opposed to the 30 percent in the non-motorized section. Each rail trail group considering applying for RTP funding must decide whether this increase in funding opportunities justifies allowing motorized vehicles on a seasonal or constant basis.

All RTP funding comes in the form of reimbursements, meaning trail groups must obtain the capital on their own, then after their project is complete, funding is given back to these groups by the Division of Parks and Recreation.⁴⁴ After the Division of Parks and Recreation selects projects to either fully or partially fulfill their grant request, all organizations are notified whether they have received funding or not in the Fall. Work on those projects is expected to begin in the Spring and conclude by December 31st of the next year.⁴⁵ Unless projects have received special permission to continue beyond that date, any work done afterwards will not be reimbursed with RTP funds.⁴⁶

4.4 FUNDING THROUGH LOCAL INTEREST GROUPS & NON-PROFITS

In addition to federal and state funding, NH rail trails are also supported by private funders. Notable private groups who fund rail trails include non-profit organizations, interest groups, social clubs, private trusts and grants, local businesses, and other charitable foundations. Many of these groups dedicate both funds as well as material purchases and volunteer labor to maintain and improve rail trails throughout the Granite State.

Non-profit foundations, often dubbed as "alliance" or "friends" groups, are notable supporters of New Hampshire rail trails. These groups are frequently composed of avid trail-users and often focus on all trails within a specific geographical region or county. These foundations collect funds via private

donations, local business sponsors, private grants, and fundraising events such as 5K races, “skate-a-thons,” and cycling events.⁴⁷ These groups help fund rail trail maintenance and improvement initiatives including installing solar lights, building bike fix-it stations, repairing bridges on trails, ditch clean-up, water erosion repairs, and installing culverts.⁴⁸

Contributions from each of these groups vary from year to year, with some dedicating a few thousand dollars each year, and other groups regularly making five-figure donations or even six-figure donations. Some of the largest private funders for New Hampshire Rail Trails include Pathways for Keene, Inc., the Upper Valley Trails Alliance, the Friends of the Northern Rail Trail in Merrimack County, and Londonderry Trailways.⁴⁹ These five groups have made historically large financial contributions towards rail trail projects throughout New Hampshire. Records of these contributions, sourced through tax documents published by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), can be found in Table 6 below. These major donors were identified via the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails website and through searching for trail-related organizations through public IRS records. Organizations with gross receipts of \$50,000 or more each year published tax records indicating how they use their funds (organizations with less than \$50,000 in gross receipts typically do not make detailed financial records publicly available). The significant contributions made towards New Hampshire rail trail projects listed in these tax documents are listed below. For each non-profit group identified as a major donor through the trails bureau and IRS database, aggregate contributions made towards rail trail projects in New Hampshire since 2015 are listed in Table 7. Note that the Upper Valley Trails Alliance supports trails in the Upper Valley Region, which encompasses parts of Vermont as well as New Hampshire. Their donations are allocated to trails across the Vermont-New Hampshire border. A breakdown of funds split between the two states is not available at this time.

Many of these groups, including the Upper Valley Trails Alliance, Londonderry Trailways, and both Friends of the Northern Rail Trail groups engage non-motorized trail users such as hikers and cyclists to contribute to trails through fundraising efforts as well as volunteer maintenance programs, such as tool-lending sheds for volunteer trail projects and organization-sponsored workdays. Notably, the Upper Valley Trails Alliance also offers paid memberships for trail users who want to enjoy organizational programming such as the tool-lending shed. These membership fees often contribute to trail maintenance as well.

Table 7: Snapshot – Donations from Non-Profit Organizations FY 2015-2019

Organization	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Pathways for Keene, Inc.	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$40,000	\$49,900	\$0	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Upper Valley Trails Alliance	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$232,593	\$253,009	\$178,415	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Friends of the Northern Rail Trail in Merrimack County	\$21,779	\$25,759	\$28,834	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Friends of the Northern Rail Trail in Grafton	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$5328	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Londonderry Trailways	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$13,858	\$197,654	\$31,765	\$368,656

Only records from 2016-2019 are currently available for these organizations.

**No detailed forms (990, 990-EZ, 990-PF or 990-T forms) were published by the IRS for this year. 990-N “e-Postcards” may be published for this year, but these forms do not include details or donation amounts.*

Some of these large private groups also play a central role in providing trails with sufficient funding by assisting municipal governments in reaching matching goals outlined by government programs. One such group that bolsters municipal funding for rail trails is Pathways for Keene, Inc., which matches the City of Keene’s 10 percent contribution for FAST Act funding.⁵⁰ This private contribution allows the city of Keene to meet the 20 percent contribution threshold that is required to receive federal funding in support of rail trails in the region.

Other private organizations supporting New Hampshire rail trails are dozens of recreational and social clubs throughout the state. One example of such groups is the Granite State Wheelers, a recreational cycling club based out of Salem, NH. Aside from a membership fee of \$15 per year, they also gain revenue through an annual bike race fundraiser. These funds contribute to the Granite State Wheelers Grant Program, which awards \$2,500 to various projects that assist with improving and acquiring New Hampshire cycling trails. Their funds have contributed to several rail trail initiatives. One project helped to repair the Northern Rail Trail in Merrimack County from expected wear and tear. Another added signs to the Granite State Rail Trail, which stretches from Concord to Manchester. Other

projects are more directly linked to improving the experience of cyclists on rail trails, such as a bike fix-it station on the Concord-Lake Sunapee Rail Trail.⁵¹

While some private groups of trail users make financial contributions to rail trails, most private social groups and sporting clubs make little to no monetary donations to New Hampshire rail trails. However, these smaller clubs still play an especially significant role in maintaining trails throughout the state. Many recreational clubs provide volunteer support and maintenance in conjunction with the New Hampshire State Parks department to maintain and improve trails. Many of these private groups, small and large, support New Hampshire rail trails by independently buying materials related to trail upkeep and improvement, engaging in lobbying activities (usually to secure additional government funding for trail projects), applying for grants from other private organizations, providing community programming, and dedicating volunteer labor to rail trail projects, assisting the New Hampshire Bureau of Trails with activities such as clearing or marking trails and providing information and support to fellow trail users. These projects are often left off of official records, as some private users of trails contribute their own money towards trail projects. Volunteer labor also greatly contributes to the upkeep of New Hampshire rail trails but is rarely recorded. Volunteer labor often comes from smaller groups of trail users who do not make official financial contributions, but participate in projects such as rail removal, paving, marking trails, and resurfacing trails for snowmobile use.

While private groups play a role in funding and maintaining rail trails throughout New Hampshire, it is important to note that user-based and private contributions are a relatively small portion of the overall rail trail budget. Moreover, the aggregate amount of private funding towards rail trails is inconsistent from year to year.

5 RAIL TRAIL FUNDING IN OTHER STATES

To locate best practices in funding rail trail development and maintenance, we conduct case studies of three states with relevant factors to New Hampshire. The three states we examine are Vermont, Maine, and New York.

5.1 VERMONT

In comparison to New Hampshire's 76 total rail trails that cover 562 miles, Vermont has a fraction of the total number of trails, and existing rail trails in Vermont cover far less ground than their Granite State counterparts. The state of Vermont has 18 rail trails, which stretch a combined 130 miles across the state.⁵² These differences in number and length of rail trails between the two states exist despite relatively similar geography, climate, and topography.

While there are some notable differences between the rail trail networks of both states, rail trails in Vermont and New Hampshire see similar types of usage. Activities including hiking, running, Nordic and back-country skiing, mountain biking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, off-road bicycling, and all-terrain vehicular or other off-road recreational vehicle use are all common throughout the state of Vermont.⁵³ Like New Hampshire trails, many Vermont trails also see notable levels of snowmobiling activity. This use is noteworthy, as snowmobiling clubs and registration organizations are often important players in trail upkeep.

Although Vermont has fewer miles of trails compared to New Hampshire, Vermont maintains robust, steady funding streams for rail trail projects and maintenance. Vermont has received an average of \$1,763,000 in federal funding from the TAP over the past five years and received over \$2 million annually in the past three years.⁵⁴ State-level and local-level initiatives also exist to help match federal funding.

Trails in Vermont are recognized for their importance at the state level and receive state-apportioned funding each year. 1993 Vermont Statute established the Vermont Trail System to oversee recognition and regulation of trails within the state. The Vermont Trail System was created to acknowledge the importance of Vermont trails and ensure that Vermont trails are recognized by the Agency of Natural Resources Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation with advice from the Vermont Trails and Greenways Council.⁵⁵

In addition to political and legislative support within the state, the Vermont congressional delegation has secured earmarked funding for rail trail projects in the past. Notable examples include then-Representative Bernie Sanders, who secured \$5.2 million in federal funding in 2005 for converting rail to trail along the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, which will be the longest rail trail in New England when complete in 2022.⁵⁶ More recently, Vermont Representative Peter Welch co-sponsored and introduced the RTP Full Funding Act of 2020.

5.1.1 FEDERAL FUNDING OF VERMONT RAIL TRAILS

Like New Hampshire, Vermont receives federal funding from several set-aside programs under the FAST Act. Two major federal funding programs for rail trails are the TAP set-aside and RTP set-aside under the FAST Act. Unlike some other states, Vermont does not dedicate significant portions of federal CMAQ funding towards its trail system, opting to instead primarily use RTP funds and TAP funds for trail projects. TAP and RTP funding can be used for trail maintenance, upkeep, and expansion of trails throughout the state of Vermont. Although Vermont uses this funding for general trail development and maintenance, little federal funding has been allocated to rail trail-specific projects in recent years.

Under TAP, Vermont has received an average \$1,763,000 in federal funding over the past five years. Federal grant dollars are also subject to state and local matches of at least 20 percent. A summary of federal TAP grants as well as local matching amounts for the fiscal years of 2016 through 2020, sourced through records published by the Vermont Department of Transportation and adjusted for inflation, are listed in Table 8 below.⁵⁷ Note that records are available for TAP awards going towards all types of trails in Vermont. Comprehensive data on rail trail-specific funding is currently unavailable.

Table 8: Federal TAP Funding Awarded to Vermont Trails 2016-2020

Fiscal Year	Federal TAP Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2016	\$1,257,504.16	\$314,376.04	\$1,571,880.20
2017	\$1,251,022.90	\$358,074.96	\$1,609,097.86
2018	\$2,286,207.07	\$583,424.52	\$2,869,631.59
2019	\$2,263,845.31	\$565,960.81	\$2,829,806.11
2020	\$2,200,306.05	\$550,077.53	\$2,750,383.58

While TAP awards do not go exclusively towards trail development and maintenance (for instance, some grant funding has been dedicated towards projects such as adding streetlamps to town greens, paving sidewalks along streets, and land use studies), these funds are available for trail projects and often constitute significant amount of funding used for rail trail development. Roughly 64.2 percent of TAP funding goes towards improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities, some of which are rail trails.⁵⁹ It is worth noting, however, that the construction of new rail trails makes up only a small number of federally funded projects under TAP in Vermont; indeed, between 1992 and 2018, only about 2.4 percent of all TAP funding awards went towards converting abandoned railways to trail corridors. This figure does not include general maintenance or development of existing rail trails, nor does it include trail construction activities that do not take place along abandoned rail beds.

In addition to TAP awards, an important source of federal funding for rail trails comes from RTP. The Vermont Department of Forests, Parks & Recreation (FPR) uses federal funding provided through the RTP and awards grants to local communities and non-profit organizations for Vermont recreational trail projects each year. A history of RTP funding awarded to trail projects in Vermont from FY 2015 through FY 2019, sourced through the FHWA RTP project database and adjusted for inflation, can be found in Table 9 below.⁶⁰ Please note that records for 2020 are not yet publicly available.

Table 9: Federal RTP Funding Awarded to Vermont Trails 2015-2019

Fiscal Year	Federal RTP Award	State, Local, & Private Match	Total Funding
2015	\$723,437.81	\$3,551,569.40	\$4,275,007.20
2016	\$751,409.52	\$522,325.98	\$1,273,735.50
2017	\$942,056.70	\$1,004,679.80	\$1,946,736.51
2018	\$912,260.72	\$737,465.01	\$1,649,725.73
2019	\$977,255.77	\$882,489.04	\$1,859,744.81

Although Vermont receives consistent federal funding under TAP and RTP for trails throughout the state, Vermont has allocated little money specifically towards its rail trails in recent years. According to the RTP project database, only \$51,304 in total federal RTP awards between 2016 and 2019 went towards rail-trail specific projects. Some RTP awards are given RTP funding for statewide trail projects which may include rail trails, but a trail-by-trail breakdown of RTP award use is typically unavailable for these projects. Rail trails still receive funding through RTP and TAP, but the state of Vermont rarely differentiates these trails from their overall trail system.

5.1.2 STATE FUNDING OF VERMONT RAIL TRAILS

In addition to federal funding and state and local matches for awards such as those granted by TAP, the state of Vermont has established a Recreational Trails Fund. The fund, established in 1993, provides monetary assistance to trail projects and draws from the Vermont state Transportation Fund.⁶¹

Under the program, \$370,000.00 is transferred annually from the Transportation Fund to the Recreational Trails Fund. The Recreational Trails Fund distributes funding to design, construct, and maintain recreational trails, to conduct studies and prepare plans, publish maps and information, and to make grants to State and municipal agencies and non-profit organizations that contribute to the development and maintenance of rail trails in Vermont.

The Agency of Natural Resources administers the Recreational Trails Fund. Funding is permitted for use on both publicly owned and privately-owned land throughout the state. Each year, 40 percent of funds allocated to the Recreational Trails fund go towards the Vermont Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, 40 percent goes towards the Vermont Association of Snow Travelers, and the remaining 20 percent is used to award grants to municipalities and non-profit organizations that support Vermont rail trails.

5.1.3 FUNDING THROUGH VERMONT INTEREST GROUPS & NON-PROFITS

Like trails in New Hampshire, many trails in Vermont receive funding and volunteer maintenance from local interest groups, non-profits, and recreational clubs. Private groups play a modest role in funding for rail trails, with most interest groups focusing their efforts on volunteer maintenance, advocacy, and recreation rather than fundraising for trail development or maintenance.

Table 10: Snapshot – Donations from Non-Profit Organizations in Vermont FY 2016-2019

Organization	2019	2018	2017	2016
Kingdom Trail Association Inc.	\$373,269	\$277,356	\$528,263	\$549,432
Upper Valley Trails Alliance	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$232,593	\$253,009	\$178,415
Catamount Trail Association	\$7,817	\$22,179	\$148,780	\$171,260

Only records from 2016-2019 are available for these organizations.

**No detailed forms (990, 990-EZ, 990-PF or 990-T forms) were published by the IRS for this year. 990-N “e-Postcards” may be published for this year, but these forms do not include details or donation amounts.*

Several organizations do make large financial contributions towards trails in Vermont, often towards activities such as clearing trails, making and maintaining signage, clearing litter, and making information available to trail users. These groups typically engage fellow trail users both in terms of monetary donations and volunteer opportunities. Most trail-related private groups in Vermont, however, are not rail-trail specific, and instead contribute money and volunteer service to a variety of trails throughout the state. Table 10 above shows donations from several key private organizations. Data is sourced from tax documents published by the IRS tax-exempt organizations data base, hosted on the IRS website.⁶²

5.1.4 COMPARISON TO NEW HAMPSHIRE PRACTICES

Compared to New Hampshire, Vermont has considerably fewer rail trails and less rail trail mileage throughout the state. However, Vermont receives roughly comparable amounts of federal funding through RTP awards for trails throughout the state. Moreover, Vermont has a specific, consistent amount of state-approved funding that is taken from the state’s transportation budget each year and allocated towards the trail system. Rail trails in Vermont, while fewer in number and mileage than those in New Hampshire, are well funded by the state and federal government and attract volunteer support and donations as well.

While little funding has been allocated specifically towards rail trails in the past few years, large rail trail projects are planned for the immediate future. In August 2020, Governor Scott announced that the Governor's FY21 budget would allocate \$2.8 million in state funds, matched by \$11.3 million in federal funds, to complete construction of the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail by the summer of 2022. The rail trail will expand by a projected 60 miles, going from 33 miles of trail to 93. The Lamoille Valley Rail Trail will be a connecting spine to several significant recreational trails in Vermont and Canada and, when completed, will be the longest rail trail in New England.

While Vermont currently has a much smaller rail-trail system than New Hampshire, the Green Mountain State's broader trail system is expansive and well-funded by TAP, RTP, state, and private funds. Additionally, Vermont has committed resources to a massive expansion of their rail trail system with the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail. Vermont, therefore, serves as an example of a well-managed trail system that has strong political support for its expansion.

5.2 MAINE

Maine has 33 rail trails covering nearly 360 miles across the state. As in New Hampshire, the trails are multi-use and open to most types of non-motorized recreation, including biking, hiking, even dogsledding on some rail trails; some trails are open to motorized snowmobiling during the winter months as well. An additional 82 miles are designated as potential additions to the existing rail trails and eight rail trail projects are currently underway.⁶³ Overall, Maine has done impressive work in transforming its rail corridors into recreational trails. An innovative feature of many Maine rail trails is that they are designed to still be functional should the railroads become active once more.⁶⁴ Four major rail trail projects are currently in development, with varying levels of support from the state, municipalities, and local organizations. Although Maine has not centralized rail trail management through the state government, the state's Department of Transportation (MaineDOT) oversees most of the funds for rail trails and contributes often to efforts to locate and develop rail trails. Occasionally, the Maine Department of Conservation (MaineDOC) will contribute to rail trail projects as well in a management capacity.

5.2.1 FEDERAL FUNDING OF MAINE RAIL TRAILS

As in New Hampshire, the federal government provides the majority of funding for trails in Maine, funds which are again nearly 100 percent apportioned to the state through The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act (FAST Act). On average, from 2015 through 2020, Maine rail trails annually received \$721,000 from the Transportation Alternatives Program (TAP) and Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) federal grant programs.⁶⁵ This share of funds is approximately half of the average total TAP and CMAQ funds awarded in the state each year. In contrast to other states, including New Hampshire, Maine awards TAP and CMAQ funds through a joint application administered by MaineDOT.⁶⁶ This program, known as Bicycle and Pedestrian Program Funding (BPPF), awarded more than \$5 million to rail trails over the last five years. Each year, MaineDOT

allocates approximately \$2.3 million for BPPF. The BPPF program requires a 20 percent funding match from the grant applicant as with New Hampshire’s TAP and CMAQ programs. Table 11 below provides a more comprehensive view of the history of rail trail projects receiving TAP and CMAQ funds during this time period. The data in the table was sourced from a project database maintained by the Rail-to-Trails Conservancy, the Maine state government’s available data, and a project database maintained by the FHWA.⁶⁷

Table 11: BPPF Funding Awarded to Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Federal BPPF Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2015	\$129,208.91	\$32,302.23	\$161,511.13
2016	\$0	\$0	\$0
2017	\$0	\$0	\$0
2018	\$0	\$0	\$0
2019	\$47,258.35	\$11,814.59	\$68,658.59
2020	\$2,663,709.08	\$2,154,048.49	\$4,817,757.57

Maine receives federal funds from the Recreational Trail Program (RTP) as well. The RTP has awarded an average of \$228,375 each year to rail trail projects within Maine, which is nearly a quarter of the average amount of total RTP funding awarded in Maine annually. A more comprehensive view of the RTP funding awarded to rail trail projects during this time period can be found in Table 12 below. The data in the table was sourced from the RTP project database maintained by the FHWA and all figures are adjusted for inflation.⁶⁸ Maine is allocated on average \$1.5 million each year from the federal government for this grant program, and MaineDOT transfers approximately two-thirds of these funds to the Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry to support that Department’s trail initiatives.⁶⁹

Table 12: RTP Funding Awarded to Rail Trail Projects

Fiscal Year	Federal RTP Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2016	\$0	\$0	\$0
2017	\$243,392.69	\$68,309.55	\$311,702.24
2018	\$50,373.11	\$15,281.21	\$65,654.32
2019	\$613,553.58	\$95,287.38	\$455,371.04
2020	\$247,320.12	\$61,829.52	\$309,149.65

5.2.2 STATE FUNDING OF MAINE RAIL TRAILS

The Maine state government consistently contributes directly to the development of rail trails across the state. Since 2017, MaineDOT has committed on average \$4 million each year to rail trail projects, although actual spending can differ depending on construction or funding delays.⁷⁰ An example that demonstrates the state's commitment to supporting rail trail development is the Eastern Rail Trail, to which MaineDOT committed contributions totaling \$3.1 million for construction from 2018 through 2020.⁷¹ Table 13 below provides a more detailed overview of the state's funding commitments of rail trails over the last five years, from 2017 to 2021, with figures adjusted for inflation.

Table 13: State Funding Commitments to Rail Trails

Fiscal Year	Funding Amount
2017	\$1,043,580.11
2018	\$5,041,722.44
2019	\$4,826,590.70
2020	\$8,441,758.98
2021	\$1,418,000*

**Projected figure*

The data for the table was sourced from MaineDOT's triennial work plans.⁷² Because commitments can carry over between years, some projects are accounted for more than once these totals. 2020 saw a notable increase in commitments because of delays in the construction of two major rail trails in the state that were allotted to receive at least \$2 million each or more.

5.2.3 FUNDING THROUGH MAINE INTEREST GROUPS & NON-PROFITS

A large variety of local organizations support the development and maintenance of rail trails in Maine. Funding comes from individual private donors, non-profit organizations, and municipalities, with the most consistent funding coming from non-profit organizations dedicated to rail trails, often called “trail alliances.” From 2016 to 2019, the five largest donors donated almost \$40,000 annually on average to rail trails in some capacity.⁷³ The level of investment from trail alliances generally remained steady year over year since 2016. The donations from other non-profit organizations are typically in the form of donations to the rail trail organizations, and these donations are frequently either small and consistent in size or else inconsistent and large in size. Many of the rail trail organizations that operate within Maine cite private businesses as significant donors as well, often through sponsorship opportunities at fundraiser events or “Adopt-a-Trail” initiatives. Table 14 below offers more detailed insight into the donations made by the five biggest donors from 2015 to 2019. The figures were sourced from public tax returns made available by the IRS.⁷⁴

Table 14: Snapshot – Donations from Non-Profit Organizations in Maine FY 2015-2019

Organization	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015
Saco And Biddeford Savings Charitable Foundation	\$500.00	\$500.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$500.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Friends of the Kennebec River Rail Trail	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$11,649.00	\$11,889.00	\$4,008.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
East Coast Greenway Alliance	\$16,089.00	\$11,858.00	\$8,467.00	\$10,358.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
The Eastern Trail Management District	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$1,250.00	\$39,045.00	\$43,120.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Eastern Trail Alliance	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$96,900.00	\$411,439.00	\$121,800.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>

Records from 2020 are not yet available.

**No detailed forms (990, 990-EZ, 990-PF or 990-T forms) were published by the IRS for this year. 990-N “e-Postcards” may be published for this year, but these forms do not include details or donation amounts.*

The trail alliances and other non-profit organizations often work closely with municipalities to plan, design, develop, and fund rail trails. The Eastern Trail Management District is a unique example of this close relationship, as it represents each of the municipalities along the trail and has entered into

an official partnership with the Eastern Trail Alliance, a non-profit dedicated to the upkeep and expansion of the Eastern Trail, a part of the East Coast Greenway. Through this partnership, the non-profit and municipalities are able to efficiently work together to achieve their shared goal of expanding and maintaining the Eastern Trail.⁷⁵ For an expansion of this trail, MaineDOT pledged \$500,000 in 2017 to the Eastern Trail, reaching a \$4.1 million fundraising goal that was established only a year prior.⁷⁶

For the Down East Sunrise Trail, the Sunrise Trail Alliance non-profit funded a majority of the construction of this rail trail by selling the rails, ties, and other hardware removed from the rail corridor.⁷⁷ With the trail now completed, maintenance is the primary focus and funded by a variety of sponsors, as coordinated by the Sunrise Trail Alliance.

5.2.4 COMPARISON TO NEW HAMPSHIRE PRACTICES

Maine and New Hampshire rail trails are primarily developed through the efforts of non-profit organizations. However, Maine differs in that municipalities and the state more frequently take an active role in supporting rail trail development. This elevated level of governmental support has been instrumental in the construction of Maine's robust rail trail network and consistent success in securing funds for small and large additions to existing rail trails. Maine's state government and municipal governments are frequent sources of funding for rail trail siting, development, and expansion, as well as occasionally contributing to maintenance as well. In contrast, the New Hampshire state government and municipalities are rare financial contributors to rail trail development.

Maine allocates fewer federal funds than New Hampshire allocates. Specifically, as stated earlier, from 2015 to 2020, Maine awarded less than \$750,000 annually to rail trails from its BPPF program, which is a combination of the federal TAP and CMAQ grants. In contrast, during that same time period, New Hampshire awarded on average \$850,000 annually to rail trails from just the TAP grant. Clearly, New Hampshire local governments and organizations are achieving high levels of success in attaining federal funds for rail trails compared to Maine local governments and organizations. Further, MaineDOT caps federal funding for BPPF projects at \$400,000, which is significantly lower than NHDOT's cap of \$1 million in federal funding for each project, permitting the construction of larger and/or higher quality projects.⁷⁸ Another important difference in Maine's strategy for administering its BPPF program compared to New Hampshire's TA and CMAQ programs is that Maine requires the 20 percent project funding match from the project applicant to be secured prior to applying for the grant.⁷⁹ As stated by Dave Topham, a member of the New Hampshire State Rail Trails Plan Advisory Stakeholders Committee, an inability for project applicants to secure their mandated share of project funding is a frequent cause of projects remaining incomplete or even uninitiated.⁸⁰ MaineDOT's requirement that this local funding be secured prior to applying for the grant would preempt this recurring issue in New Hampshire. However, it should be noted that this more stringent requirement is likely the reason why only three rail trail projects have received funding from BPPF since 2016.⁸¹

The local trail non-profits are greater in number and more active in Maine compared to New Hampshire. This elevated quantity and activity better support the rail trails through the entirety of the trails' life cycles. Financial and managerial support through the life cycle of a rail trail is critical, but New Hampshire often struggles to maintain this support in a way that Maine does not. Encouraging the establishment of more rail trail alliances in New Hampshire could meet this need.

5.3 NEW YORK

In comparison to New Hampshire's 76 total rail trails that cover 562 miles, New York has 750 continuous miles of rail trail known as the Empire State Trail (EST).⁸² While both states have a significant amount of rail trail mileage, one key difference is that New York has a centralized rail trail system whereas New Hampshire's rail trails are discontinuous, with numerous rail trails not connecting to others. A significant factor in the appeal of New York's rail trails is that it is feasible to traverse the entire state on rail trails. In New Hampshire, unimproved or non-existent sections of trail prevent such a cross-state expedition.

Unlike New Hampshire, New York limits use of its rail trails to hiking, running, biking, Nordic skiing, and horseback riding. Given that New York is a more populous state with trails that experience higher usage than New Hampshire trails, New York prohibits the use of motorized vehicles on most rail trails that allow pedestrian use to prevent accidents. Snowmobilers, dirt bikers, and ATV users have their own sets of trails that are maintained by private clubs and organizations.⁸³ This approach has tradeoffs. New York minimizes the risk of a potential pedestrian-motor vehicle accident that is possible on multi-use trails. However, by reserving rail trails for non-motorized use, New York cannot tap into a significant source of user funding: recreational vehicle fees, licenses, and registrations. New York compensates for this lack of motorized sport funding by providing more state budget money towards trails.

Like Vermont, strong support for rail trail projects in New York may stem in part from long standing political support. Ecotourism is well-established in New York, which is home to the six million-acre Adirondack Park.⁸⁴ The historical success of outdoor recreation and ecotourism encourages legislators to recognize the investment potential that rail trails bring to New York.

Trails in New York are recognized for their importance at the state level and receive state-apportioned funding each year. In 2017, Governor Cuomo announced the EST Project, which provides funding for the improvement and maintenance of rail trails throughout the state.⁸⁵ The EST Project has three central regions: The Hudson Valley, Champlain Valley, and Erie Canalway. Unlike the current New Hampshire rail trail proposal, which is managed solely by the Department of Transportation, the EST Project has its own director and leadership, which is not part of a larger agency within the state. However, it is assisted by five state agency stakeholders: NYS Canal Corporation, NYS Department

of Transportation, Metropolitan Transportation Authority, New York State Parks, and the Hudson River Valley Greenway.⁸⁶

5.3.1 FEDERAL FUNDING OF NEW YORK RAIL TRAILS

Like New Hampshire, New York receives federal funding from several set-aside programs under the FAST Act. Three major federal funding programs for rail trails are the TAP set-aside and RTP set-aside under the FAST Act.⁸⁷ These two funding programs can be used for trail maintenance, upkeep, and expansion of trails throughout the state of New York.

New York receives rail trail funding from the TAP and CMAQ Programs, which are awarded together and biennially during even years.⁸⁸ Note that the TAP-CMAQ award recipients for FY 2020 have yet to be published. While most of TAP-CMAQ funding does not go to rail trails, they are eligible to receive funding under TAP and CMAQ if a rail trail grant is chosen. All figures in Table 15 below have been adjusted for inflation.

Table 15: New York TAP-CMAQ Rail Trail Funding

Fiscal Year	New York State TAP-CMAQ Funding	Rail Trail Funding
2016	\$122,177,029.00	\$6,960,929.96
2018	\$150,319,515.58	\$5,869,013.50

In addition to TAP-CMAQ funding, New York rail trails receive funding from RTP. While RTP awards do not go exclusively towards rail trail development and maintenance, RTP funding typically constitutes a large amount of funding used for rail trail development in New York. A summary of federal RTP grants that were used specifically for rail trails as well as local matching amounts for those projects for the fiscal years of 2016 through 2020 are listed below in Table 15. Note that prior to the launch of the EST Project in 2017, there was no RTP funding available for rail trails. All figures in Table 16 were sourced from the FHWA RTP Project Database and have been adjusted for inflation.⁸⁹

Table 16: New York RTP Rail Trail Funding

Fiscal Year	Federal RTP Award	Local Match	Total Funding
2016	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
2017	\$423,128.52	\$110,002.74	\$533,131.26
2018	\$406,268.96	\$101,567.24	\$507,836.20
2019	\$511,587.79	\$319,742.37	\$831,330.16
2020	\$485,139.19	\$97,027.84	\$582,167.03

5.3.2 STATE FUNDING OF NEW YORK RAIL TRAILS

In addition to federal funding and state and local matches for federal awards, the state of New York allocated a one-time sum of money to the EST Project directly from the state budget. New York allocated \$200 million to the EST Project in the state's FY 2017 budget.⁹⁰ The money was intended to finance trail improvements through the end of FY 2020, which were completed on time despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the project has been completed, New York has not made any recent moves to provide state money for the improvement of rail trails, instead it has encouraged local groups to apply for federal or private grants. However, as the EST Project continues to age into the future, the state may consider allocating more money to maintenance.

5.3.3 FUNDING THROUGH NEW YORK INTEREST GROUPS & NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

Like trails in New Hampshire, many rail trails in New York receive funding and volunteer maintenance from local interest groups, non-profits, and recreational clubs. Private groups play a modest role in funding for rail trails, with most interest groups focusing their efforts on volunteer maintenance, advocacy, and recreation rather than fundraising for trail development or maintenance. Several organizations do make large financial contributions towards trails in New York, often towards activities such as clearing trails, making and maintaining signage, clearing litter, and making information available to trail users.⁹¹ These groups typically engage fellow trail users both in terms of monetary donations and volunteer opportunities. All figures in Table 17 were sourced from public tax returns made available by the IRS. Note that only public records for 2016-2019 for these organizations are currently available.⁹²

Table 17: Snapshot – Donations from Non-Profit Organizations in New York FY 2016-2019

Organization	2019	2018	2017	2016
Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation	\$0.00	\$50,000,000.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
Erie Cattaraugus Rail Trail Inc.	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$40,000.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Chautauqua Rails to Trails, Inc.	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$10,116.00	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	<i>Records unavailable*</i>
Harlem Valley Rail Trail Association	<i>Records unavailable*</i>	\$56,493.00	\$357,637.96	\$127,507.37

Only records from 2016-2019 are currently available for these organizations.

**No detailed forms (990, 990-EZ, 990-PF or 990-T forms) were published by the IRS for this year. 990-N “e-Postcards” may be published for this year, but these forms do not include details or donation amounts.*

5.3.4 COMPARISON TO NEW HAMPSHIRE PRACTICES

Compared to New Hampshire, New York has a centralized rail trail system that is more limited in its permissible types of usage. Despite having fewer users and limited funding for rail trails compared to New York, New Hampshire can take advantage of additional revenue generated from motorized activities on certain trails. New Hampshire can also look to New York’s centralized EST project as an example on ways to cut costs and streamline the management of the New Hampshire rail trail system.

6 INTRASTATE AGENCY CASE STUDY

In addition to examining the funding practices of other rail systems in the Northeast, this report includes information on the funding mechanisms of similar departments in New Hampshire. The New Hampshire Fish and Game department serves as an example of a comparable department to the New Hampshire Trails Bureau in terms of function and goals but has different funding mechanisms.

6.1 NEW HAMPSHIRE FISH AND GAME DEPARTMENT

New Hampshire’s Fish and Game department has a wide range of responsibilities. These responsibilities are trifold: first, management of the state’s fish, wildlife, and marine resources and habitats; second, educating the public about these resources; and third, facilitating public use of these resources.⁹³ The department is responsible for independently funding the majority of its budget, which is typical of most state fish and game departments across the United States.⁹⁴ However, traditional

sources of revenue have declined as a direct result of declining participation in fishing and hunting in New Hampshire.⁹⁵ Consequently, Fish and Game has struggled to locate additional sources of revenue in the face of rising budget deficits. In this section, we first provide a brief overview of the federal and limited state funding provided to the department. Next, we investigate the traditional revenue collection strategies employed by Fish and Game and more innovative funding strategies implemented by the department in recent years.

6.1.1 FEDERAL FUNDING

Of the roughly 30 million annual operating budget of the Fish and Game Department, approximately one third of funds comes from federal awards.⁹⁶ The majority of federal funding available to the Fish and Game department are the Wildlife Restoration Program (Pittman-Robertson or PR) and Sport Fishery Restoration Program (Dingell-Johnson or DJ).⁹⁷ A history of awards to the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department for 2016 through 2019, sourced through the department's biennial reports to the Governor's Office and adjusted for inflation, can be found in Table 18 on the following page.⁹⁸

Table 18: Federal Funding Awarded to the
New Hampshire Fish and Game Department 2016-2019

Fiscal Year	Federal Funding
2016	\$11,542,510.56
2017	\$9,622,366.46
2018	\$10,330,619.48
2019	\$10,863,355.64

Note that only records from 2016-2019 are currently publicly available.

6.1.2 STATE FUNDING

State funding constitutes a very small part of the Fish and Game Department's overall budget. Indeed, general funds from the state of New Hampshire typically represent less than 3 percent of the department's funding. A breakdown of state funding for Fish and Game for FY 2015-2019 as it appears in the Executive Budget Summaries from the New Hampshire Governor's Office, adjusted for inflation, are listed in Table 19 below.⁹⁹ Note that data on the Fiscal Year ending June 30, 2021 is not yet publicly available.

Table 19: State Funding for
New Hampshire Fish and Game FY 2015 -2019

Fiscal Year	Federal Funding
2015	\$893,000
2016	\$650,000
2017	\$650,000
2018	\$799,912
2019	\$808,180

6.1.3 USER FUNDING

Approximately two-thirds of Fish and Game’s funding is sourced from an assortment of fees and taxes paid by users of New Hampshire wildlife resources.¹⁰⁰ Around one half of these user-sourced funds are provided by fishing and hunting licenses and permit fees. From 2016 to 2019, an average of \$8,992,243.55 in revenue was raised through these user fees.¹⁰¹ Fish and Game has the authority to set the cost of fishing and hunting licenses and permit fees, which has been important for helping the department close budget gaps each year. User-sourced funds are also collected through registration fees for off-highway recreational vehicles (OHRVs) and snowmobiles and an unrefunded motorboat gas tax.¹⁰² Importantly, Fish and Game splits the revenue generated from OHRV and snowmobile registrations with the Bureau of Trails. Fish and Game receives around 18 percent of the money generated from snowmobile registration fees and around 41 percent of the money generated from OHRV registration fees. The Bureau of Trails utilizes their share of the money towards grants made available to local clubs, which can use these grants for trail maintenance, including rail trails. From 2016 to 2019, Fish and Game received an average of \$202,522 from the registration fees and \$1,634,053.60 from the motorboat gas tax.¹⁰³ Note that only biennial reports on Fish and Game’s expenditures and revenue collection are available, and these reports only provide the final numbers for the first year of the report.

One innovative revenue collection source utilized by the Search and Rescue Office of the Fish and Game department is the Hike Safe Card.¹⁰⁴ This voluntary program, first implemented in 2015, enables users of New Hampshire outdoor recreation opportunities to support Search and Rescue operations while potentially reducing their liability for rescue costs should the user need rescuing services. From 2015 to 2019, this program has raised on average \$118,956, with a minimum revenue generation of approximately \$100,000 in 2016 and a maximum revenue generation of \$135,075 in 2018.¹⁰⁵ The card costs \$25 per person and \$35 per family and is valid from the date of purchase until December 31 of

the year of purchase. The target user of the Hike Safe Card is individuals and families that participate in outdoor recreation activities in New Hampshire but do not already possess a current New Hampshire hunting or fishing license, current OHRV or snowmobile registration, or current boat registration, all of which include the same benefits as the Hike Safe Card.

Fish and Game has considered a number of additional funding mechanisms. Although currently unpursued, in Fish and Game’s 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, the department states that it is considering implementing a donor license so that supporters of the department that do not hunt or fish can directly contribute to the department, as well as facilitating online private donations to the department.¹⁰⁶

6.1.4 FUNDING FROM PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS & NON-PROFITS

Fish and Game supplements its revenue collections through The Wildlife Heritage Foundation of New Hampshire, the department’s official non-profit partner.¹⁰⁷ This non-profit 501(c)(3) was formed in 2006 as a way to supplement the Fish and Game department amidst falling revenues from licenses for hunting and fishing.

A five-year history of the Wildlife Heritage Foundation of New Hampshire’s contributions to the Fish and Game Department, sourced from tax documents published through the IRS, can be found in Table 20 below. Note that records from 2020 are not yet available.

Table 20: Wildlife Heritage Foundation Contributions to New Hampshire Fish and Game

Fiscal Year	Contributions
2015	\$122,223
2016	\$52,009
2017	\$62,150
2018	\$62,150
2019	\$81,077

To encourage donations, the Foundation offers five different giving options beyond a traditional donation.¹⁰⁸ The Foundation has registered with AmazonSmile, permitting supporters to support the non-profit by setting the Foundation as their charity of choice on AmazonSmile. The annual moose permit auction is also a primary fundraiser for the Foundation, with the number of available permits set by Fish and Game according to the state’s current moose population management goals.¹⁰⁹ In

addition to the moose permit, the highest bidder also receives a general New Hampshire hunting license and bear and turkey tags.

The Foundation focuses primarily on supporting the “educational, conservation and wildlife programs” of Fish and Game.¹¹⁰ The Foundation funds its mission primarily through private, charitable donations as well as through the selling of branded merchandise and the auctioning of moose hunting permits.

Funds raised by the Foundation support grant projects, the purpose of which vary each year depending on need and interest.¹¹¹ Past projects have included the purchasing of equipment and gear for Fish and Game, conservation initiatives, ecology surveys, museum exhibits, scholarships to outdoor programs, and the publication of a wildlife magazine and its distribution to state classrooms and youth groups. From 2016 to 2017, the Foundation funded 18 projects at a cost of \$193,341; from 2018 to 2019, 22 projects were funded at a cost of \$166,815.¹¹²

6.1.5 APPLICATION TO RAIL-TRAIL FUNDING

There are three relevant funding strategies employed by Fish and Game that could be employed by NHDOT to support the development and maintenance of rail trails. The first relevant strategy is user-funding strategies, such as Hike Safe Cards. Dave Topham, a board member of the New Hampshire Rail Trails Coalition, suggested a similar program that would enable rail trail users to support trail maintenance through a voluntary recurring payment of a rail trail user fee.¹¹³ Just as Fish and Game created a partner non-profit, a similar non-profit could be established that works closely with NHDOT and the Bureau of Trails to support rail trails. This endeavor would centralize the work that many non-profit organizations already do, thereby facilitating easier collaboration and coordination between these organizations and the state government, increasing the efficiency with which resources are deployed to develop and maintain rail trails across the state. Finally, Fish and Game’s idea of providing an opportunity to supporters to donate online directly to the department could also be a potential option for either NHDOT or the Bureau of Trails.

7 CONCLUSION

This research analyzes New Hampshire rail trail funding mechanisms to best inform the rail trail updating process that the state is undertaking. By examining current funding methods within New Hampshire, conducting comparative research and analysis on the mechanisms in Vermont, Maine, and New York, and assessing the funding practices of the New Hampshire Fish and Game department and Parks and Recreation department, this research outlines the challenges and best practices of comparable agencies for the NHDOT to consider. This research offers important insights for funding practices across the northeast as rail trails become an increasingly viable and appealing option for

public transportation as the nation takes steps to mitigate the harmful effects of fossil fuel in its fight against climate change.

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